

Native In America: Ways of Being

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This exploration is a product of my conversations with two major figures in the local native American community. Through my research for the final project for the course, I worked closely with Mike Evans, Chairman of the Snohomish tribe, whom I have also worked with previously. I am also friends with Sherman Alexie, the local Native American (originally from near Spokane, now living in Wedgwood) author best known for his short stories full of big ideas, broken dreams, and the gritty realities of the Native American experience.

Both of these men have a unique perspective on the journey of being a bicultural person. Through my conversations with them, I got the sense of the challenges they as individuals face as Native Americans. Their experience have been intimately linked to their people's struggles to not only maintain their identity in the face of the multicultural society around them, but also to reclaim and preserve lost knowledge and traditions of the past for the benefit of future generations. Mike does this through his cultural leadership, and Sherman does this through his writing. Although catering to very different audiences, they are part of a powerful discourse of the inherent value of Native identity, even in the case of nearly unimaginable cultural and linguistic onslaught that has accompanied the history of nation from its earliest days to the present.

Today, both men are well-attuned to their native roots and have largely come to terms with themselves as bicultural people. Mike, as a community leader, is in charge of organizing culture events and has gained a basic knowledge of the Snohomish's ancestral language, Lushootseed. Sherman, although he may have left his family and friends behind him when he left the reservation, he never forgot where he came from. Mike is constantly immersed in the language and culture, but Sherman remains somewhat distant from it. Both men have a unique set of life experiences that have defined themselves and how they see themselves in the world, and I will explore these in turn.

The sense of pride that Sherman and Mike feel towards their Indian identity was not always present. In fact, its rediscovery is a very recent phenomenon, and one that is still not widespread or popular. When both men were growing up in the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s, Indian culture was something to be ashamed of. Boarding schools, BIA agents, and a hostile public opinion had forced the Native American consciousness underground. Mandatory conversion to Christianity was common and traditional ceremonies, songs, and dances were banned. During this period in American Indian history, roughly between 1870 and the 1960s in

our area, much traditional knowledge was lost, and what was not lost was deliberately forgotten in an attempt to assimilate into White America. It was like the old saying goes: “Kill the Indian to Save the Man”.

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that the societal taboo on Native American culture began to lift. The Civil Rights movement, as well as the growth and actions of Indian advocacy groups, helped a generation of Native Americans begin to overturn outdated laws and begin the process of taking back their heritage. But the process was far from easy, and many fights over treaty rights, reservations, and federal recognition continue to this day. Native people and youth still face many obstacles on the road to success, imposed by both Indian and White society as they search for their cultural identity.

Mike’s bicultural realization was long in the making. Because he grew up in an environment where the language and culture was not valued, Mike did not have a strong sense of either the language or culture until much later in his life. He was an adult before he really became reacquainted with tribal customs, and began to learn the language. These were conscious decisions that he had to make, rather than something that came naturally. Ironically enough, by the time that Mike had started expressing an interest in the language and culture, few if any people in the Snohomish tribe had the means or knowledge to tell him what he wanted to know. He had to actively look outside of his community for what he was after, and found it in the form of two unlikely mentors.

With no mother tongue Lushootseed speakers in his community left, Mike ended up learning Lushootseed from a white anthropologist named Zalmai Zahir, who is currently in the process of earning the first-ever PhD in Lushootseed from the University of Oregon. In the native community, he worked with a cultural and linguistic giant- Vi Hilbert. Hilbert was a tribal elder of the Upper Skagit people and presumably the last mother- tongue speaker of Lushootseed. She is perhaps best known for her 40-year collaboration with Dr. Thomas Hess of the Universities of Washington and Victoria on a Lushootseed dictionary and a variety of educational and cultural materials.

Because of this work she was an understandably busy woman, with little free time to dedicate to side projects and people with inquires like Mike. The first time he approached her, she paid no attention. The second and third time, she barely noticed him. It was not until the fifth or sixth meeting, months after seeing her initially, that Mike was finally able to win an audience.

Once they got to know each other, it was a productive partnership. When I asked why such a font of knowledge would ignore someone eager to learn, Mike told me that her initial reluctance was a test to see whether he was really serious. Hilbert considered her work and her knowledge too important to share casually, and wanted to vet anyone who wanted to work with her. She was not about to waste her efforts on someone with a passing interest in what she had to share when there was so much work to be done. What she had to share was the sacred recollections of a lost society, something which her dedication reminded everyone was not to be taken lightly.

Hilbert's protectiveness and sense of propriety is not uncommon. For years in the local Native American community, there has been an ongoing debate how best to preserve the language and run educational and outreach programs. There are sparse resources, both human and monetary, and more than enough need to go around. To make the best use of what they had, many tribal leaders maintained that only Native youth should be taught the language and traditional customs. Others, such as Mike, maintained that anyone who was committed to learning about his people should have the opportunity to do so. This issue of how to address 'intellectual property' is something that has been struggled with in Native American communities around the country.

Consequently, Lushootseed education efforts fall on both sides of the debate. Tulalip and Muckleshoot tribal schools, the best-funded and best-staffed thanks in large part to casino profits, bar non-Native youth from attending classes, and only then make it available to their registered members rather than the Native community at large. Non-Natives are de facto segregated, if only for the reason that they don't live on reservations and generally have no reason to go to tribal schools anyway. Lushootseed education programs elsewhere have been attempted from time to time, but have proved difficult to maintain with small numbers of instructors and an even smaller pool of prospective students. Mike has tutored a number of Lushootseed learners and hopes to set up a program in the Kent Public Schools with the materials he has, but currently lacks the funding and administrative support to do so.

Efforts to promote Lushootseed and culture are stymied in part by the Snohomish's lack of federal recognition. Even though they were promised a reservation and recognition under the terms of the Treaty of Point Elliot, signed in 1855, they received neither. They have exhausted their appeals with the BIA and the courts, and have been sued repeatedly by other tribes to prevent a change in status. Their only hope for recognition now is a congressional champion to

petition the President to sign them into existence. For the Snohomish, it is the ultimate insult and a final betrayal. Their right to sovereignty is ignored, and at the same time are looked down on by other Natives. As Mike told me, “If Indians are second-class citizens, that makes us something less than second-class citizens”. They have endured many trials, and now they have hit an obstacle that they cannot overcome without great momentum. But their people are tired, and do not have the strength to fight the government or push back against White society yet again.

It is because of this and other rejections that cultural ambivalence remains a major problem. The government did a very good job at stamping out the culture, and alcohol, violence, and poverty did the rest. Even today, with great strides made towards kickstarting the Indian consciousness, much remains to be done. Mike estimates that of the 1500 people who self-identify as Snohomish, fewer than 30 are involved in serious planning of cultural events or in Lushootseed revitalization efforts. By all accounts, this is a very low figure. Many Snohomish members, and especially youth, are nowhere to be found in this process.

Much of this can be explained by a lack of funding and resources (which would have been provided if the tribe was recognized), but these factors, although very real, are only part of the problem. Instead, Mike points to an entrenched lack of interest in learning about language of culture among youth and young adults in Native communities. Because of the realities of reservation life, most associate ‘being Indian’ with a lack of opportunity and host of other vices. They disparage traditional songs, dances, and ceremonies as old-fashioned and out of place in today’s world. They are so thoroughly assimilated, at least culturally, that they really don’t view themselves as Native American. But because of historical injustices, many cannot consider themselves truly and fully American either. The contradiction leads right to the conundrum of not really belonging anywhere. Society and tribal life forces them to choose, and they feel that they cannot pick either one.

Sherman’s experience was similar. As is described in a number of his books, he fled the reservation in his childhood, going through great difficulties to attend an all-white high school in a neighboring community. Many on the reservation condemned his choice, accusing him of selling out to White America. But it was thanks to the many people in his life that supported him that allowed him to go on and enjoy the successful career he has. Very early on, Sherman knew that he needed to escape life on the ‘rez’ - a place where domestic violence, alcoholism, and

poverty prevented any meaningful progress. He knew that opportunity would not come to him, a poor Indian, and decided to take a stand for his future and make his own way in the world, even if by doing so he left everything he knew behind him.

Sherman likens the way he sees himself to an apple- “Red on the outside, white on the inside”. This is not so different from the Oreos and bananas that African Americans and Asian Americans compare themselves to. He is Native American by blood, but he and his people lived so long under government and societal oppression that they have lost the connection to the Indian within them. They have been thoroughly Americanized by the efforts of missionaries and military men and teachers with rulers. They rebel against white society for their condition, but have nothing to take pride in in their place. Cultural events for Sherman went as far as eating fry bread and going to rodeos. He, nor anyone else he knows, has ever learned the language or culture. Presumably, this knowledge is locked away somewhere in the BIA archives or on the shelves of an office in a university, but literally nothing has been retained by the people that created it. But his people aren’t really missing it. They are far too concerned with surviving until tomorrow to search for cultural affirmation. The rez is a place of abject despair where a civilization has gone to die.

Perhaps because of a complete divorce from what his culture once was, Sherman has turned to his writing as a way to express his identity. In a sense, he has sought to create something of a culture and a mindset on his own, something that falls somewhere between Indian America and White America, neither one but uniquely different. Sherman has never returned to the reservation and has never looked back. He doesn’t know the language or have a strong connection to any sort of cultural legacy. Every facet of Indian culture that he experiences is something that he has had to discover or invent for himself, always dogged by the grotesque parodies provided by American serotypes of noble savages and braves fighting cowboys on TV. But not everyone is so motivated or can take the drastic step of relocating, both physically and mentally, and in the views of some turning his back on his roots and ‘selling out to the Man’. And so they remain somewhere, as do the Snohomish, in a cultural twilight where everything is neither white nor red but a uniform grey of perpetual shame and ignorance.

For both, identity is fundamentally intertwined with language. Over and over again in our conversations, Mike would remind me of the role that Lushootseed played in his cultural psyche and that of his people: “language is everything”. It provided the framework for the ceremonies,

songs, and dances of his people and allowed them to take o a life of their own. It was, and is, a language that is perfectly suited to its environment. It had a rich vocabulary to describe the natural bounty of our area- the plants, the animals, the fish and the creatures of the tidepools of Puget Sound. The people who used it shaped it to fit their conception of the world and what they saw of value and of beauty in it. It is no mistake that the name Lushootseed roughly means “people of the salt water” – a name as fitting and as salient as any that could be bestowed centuries later by an ethnographer or anthropologist.

Such was the power of Lushootseed, Mike tells me, that it was the first thing to go when his people tried to forget their culture, and it was the first thing they searched for when they sought to rediscover it. Songs and stories can be translated into any language, but some degree of richness is inevitably lost in the process. The language gives ceremonies and rituals their sacred power. Equivalent concepts and descriptions in English or other languages can be hard to come by, and many simply do not exist, as Hess’ and Hilbert’s Lushootseed dictionary clearly shows. Lushootseed poetry, a subtle series of prefixes and suffixes and inflexion applied to roots, is something that can only be understood and appreciated by other Lushootseed speakers. Lushootseed, as with all languages, presents a unique viewpoint and distillation of a culture that cannot be found anywhere else on earth. And when languages are lost or forgotten or erased, some part of our common heritage as people goes dark.